

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. My name is Ellie Martin and I am a candidate in the Master's of Social Work program at the University of Montana and a resident of Gallatin County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all about the importance of statewide Guardian ad litem reform proposed under HB 281. I am one of the students of whom Dr. Wozniak spoke when she mentioned various research objectives pursued by students in her Advanced Policy Analysis class. As a commuter to University of Montana from Bozeman, I was invested in examining the Guardian ad litem issue outside of district four to know how it might affect my neighbors in District 18 and beyond. Through our research we discovered that the use of Guardians ad litem (GAL) varies throughout the state of Montana based on responses from county clerks, attorneys, current GALs, parents, tribal court administrators, and other interviewees.

There are various factors that influence the availability and usage of GALs across the state. The vast distances between population centers and the typically rural population both limit the number of individuals who volunteer for the task in many districts and reservations. Additionally, the socioeconomic climate in many rural districts and reservations influences the implementation of the current GAL statutes. In many districts with pervasive poverty, GALs are not used because families cannot afford to pay for their services. There is an informal consensus that, if they were available and affordable, GALs would be utilized to take the burden off of district and tribal courts.

With the passage of HB 281, I am optimistic that the clarified guidelines, training requirements, and formalized grievance procedure would serve two important objectives. One, more individuals may rise to the occasion of acting as a GAL and looking out for the best interests of children in divorce settlements because they would have a clear understanding of their role and its expectations. Second, the cost containment components outlined in the bill would make GALs more available to parents who currently cannot afford one due to the incredibly high costs that can accrue without any regulation.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about this statewide issue. The safety and wellbeing of many children may rest in your hands and I urge you to vote in favor of passing HB 281.

Sincerely

Ellie Martin

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